

The psychological wage of liberalism was laid bare at the DNC

If *democracy* is a moral abstraction instead of an embodied struggle, it won't survive.

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On Wednesday night, Barack Obama took the stage in Philadelphia to deliver his fifth consecutive Democratic National Convention speech. His skills as an orator, even in the absence of a crowd and its rapturous energy, are undimmed from the moment he electrified the 2004 gathering with his breakthrough keynote. While no one may match Bill Clinton's record of 11 consecutive convention appearances, Obama remains the speaker worth pausing to see. It was a punchy and vividly-written speech. But the distance between it and his soaring early efforts felt very long in more than years.

In those early speeches Obama promised progress—never utopian, but always ambitious. In Wednesday's speech, as Vox's Matt Yglesias [put it](#), Obama offered only

“a twilight struggle to preserve the basic trappings of political democracy.” It emphasized the obstacles faced by earlier generations of the excluded and marginalized, and their ability to rise to the challenge. Now, Obama said—speaking at times explicitly to the low-propensity voter—you have to do your part or the whole American enterprise in democratic self-government could be lost.

It’s an argument with the virtue of being true. But it sounded, with the dubious benefit of four, eight, and 12 years of hindsight, forlorn and inadequate. I remember only too well how it feels to be moved by the ideal of democratic self-government as a formal expression of human equality and dignity. But I don’t feel it anymore.

Voting, even for an eventual winner, even for one who may stem the tide of democratic decline, is not an end in itself. As a sudden collapse in unemployment benefits and the expiration of eviction moratoriums threatens millions of households, it ill-behooves an opposition party to say, in effect, “let them eat democracy.”

I felt an uneasy chill as I watched the convention unfold and that theme—decency, democracy, the duty to make a plan and get out and vote—soared above any particular case for why Joe Biden and his party should be put in charge of our public policy. “What country do you want to live in?” the speakers asked, implicitly and explicitly, throughout.

And yes, I want to live in the country they tried to represent: diverse, peaceable, tolerant, full of civic virtue. The Thursday night montage introducing Joe Biden, and Biden’s own speech, were heavy on this kind of uplift. Respect. Dignity. The importance of work. The sacred obligation to our military. These are sturdy themes, appealing, and fundamentally conservative in the old-fashioned sense of the word.

But as they were announced over and over, it seemed to me that we were being asked to work for, borrowing W.E.B. Du Bois’s phrase, a psychological wage. Not, to be sure, Du Bois’s “psychological wage of whiteness,” in which the privilege of belonging to an enfranchised group compensates for low actual wages. The Democratic convention offered instead a psychological wage of liberalism: a sense of belonging and virtue that floats free of material needs and interests.

Popular and critical platform planks like a public option for health insurance, a \$15 minimum wage, and expanded union organizing were mentioned only in passing. We were only occasionally asked to vote to advance our interests—Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren gave more compelling arguments for Biden’s platform than he

himself did—but were constantly being asked to vote to express our civic virtue and our better impulses.

In part this reflects the defeat of the party's progressives by its centrist establishment, which views abstract appeals as non-threatening, both to the relatively affluent segment of the electorate they hope to win over and to donors, without whom the party can scarcely be said to exist at a national level. As a convention theme, it dovetailed with a grasp of pure spectacle that appears to have finally rivaled the current president's. For years, the party's leaders have seemed lost in making appeals about procedure, or tedious arguments about policy details, against a president who cares about neither. This week they put together an event full of emotionally-attuned imagery of personal and collective grief and crisis.

But this wage of liberalism is also a consequence of Obama's own failures, from his unwillingness to rescue homeowners in 2009 all the way to his statesmanlike and deeply mistaken refusal to be open and clear about the goals of the Russian influence operation in 2016. People did turn out for him, in vast numbers. I was one of them, and I remember the tens of thousands streaming into Grant Park and through downtown Chicago on election night in 2008.

Much of the disappointment that followed was due to actors other than Obama and his party's congressional leadership. But if those leaders have learned anything at all from the agonizingly slow recovery, the failure to pass climate change legislation, the partial dismantling of the Affordable Care Act, and the brutal fortunes of Plains State and Rust Belt Democrats, they haven't shared it with us.

And since Obama left office, the institutional failures of American democracy have only compounded. The Senate won't enforce basic constitutional order. The courts won't protect basic voting rights. We can't even get mail. If the hypothetical young, disengaged non-voter has failed a test of democratic citizenship, they have much more been failed by our democracy, such as it is.

If *democracy* is going to be a moral abstraction instead of the embodied way we struggle for our basic rights and needs, it isn't going to survive. People will not vote forever out of mere duty to the process itself. I can't claim to know how the convention sounded to those it was aimed at. I'm not a swing voter and I won't stay home. If this rhetoric works, it will be vindicated.

But the party that calls itself Democratic needs to understand that a failure to deliver this time will be costly, perhaps permanently so. Liberalism needs to secure real wages. Eventually even liberals won't be able to work for less.